

Hey, Buddha! Don't Think! Just Act! Reply to Finnigan*

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ROUGH DRAFT—DO NOT QUOTE

1. The Problem: How a Buddhist can Conceptualize a Buddha's Enlightened Action

Finnigan (200x), in the course of a careful and astute discussion of the difficulties facing a Buddhist account of the moral agency of a buddha, develops a challenging critique of a proposal I made in Garfield (2006). Much of what she says is dead on target, and I have learned much from her paper. But I have serious reservations about the central thrust both of her critique of my own thought and about her proposal for a positive account of a buddha's enlightened action. Curiously, in another fine paper (Finnigan and Tanaka 200x), Finnigan and her co-author have anticipated much of what I will say in reply. I will rely in part on that second paper in my reply to the essay that appears in this volume.

The first task is to be clear about exactly what is at issue between us, as it is easy to lose focus, and closely related questions can be hard to distinguish. In (2006) I was concerned not to give an account of a buddha's *action*, but rather to explore the resources that Buddhist philosophy has internally to explain the nature of a buddha's *thought* after enlightenment. These are slightly different issues. One might, for instance, think that even the best Buddhist action theory or philosophy of mind is ultimately unsuccessful, but still think that it faces no special problems for accounting for a *buddha's* thought. Or, one might think that one can provide a compelling account of awakened thought or action, but believe that that account is not available within a Buddhist philosophical framework. In any case, while my

* Thanks to John Powers for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

focus in (2006) was *thought*, Finnigan's is *action*. I agree with her that my account has important implications for action theory, and will engage her critique in that domain.

On the other hand, we are both concerned with the central question: how can a Buddhist explain a buddha's awakened thought and action? In (2006) I argued, as Finnigan points out accurately, that while Indian Buddhist philosophy did not have the resources to articulate a theory of a buddha's awakened thought, Chinese Buddhism, inflected both by Indian Yogācārin ideas and by Daoist ideas, does. I argued that this is because of the availability in the Chinese tradition of a non-representational theory of mind not available to an Indian Buddhist philosopher. I say this at the outset because I will argue that Finnigan's own account of a buddha's action, while perhaps an acceptable *external* account of how an awakened being conceptualized in some tradition can think and act, is not, as she believes, acceptable *within a Buddhist framework*, for reasons having to do with issues in both Buddhist philosophy of mind and theory of action. I will also argue that, for closely related reasons, her critique of my own proposal is not successful.

2. Finnigan's Official Account of Action

Let us call an account of action *Davidsonic* if according to it when one acts, (1) one does so for *reasons* (as opposed to mere causes); (2) that one can explain one's own action by *appeal to* those reasons; (3) that one represents one's action intentionally. Finnigan's account of action is Davidsonic. She writes:

Agency, on our definition, is instantiated in intentional action, and intentional action involves the capacity to both 'direct' behavior and give intentional explanations for the direction of such behavior. [8]

Such accounts of the nature of action are familiar in the West, and are indeed fairly mainstream. I concede to Finnigan that if a Davidsonic account is correct, then the account of awakened thought and action I propose in (2006) is not cogent. I would add, however, that if Buddhist action theory were Davidsonic, Buddhism would have no resources for explaining a buddha's awakened activity. On the other hand, I will show that to adopt a Davidsonic account at the outset begs the question in this context. Part of the burden of (2006) is to provide a non-Davidsonic account of action, to show that such an account is

available to Buddhism, that the Chinese tradition opens this possibility, and that a non-Davidsonic account can in fact provide an account of awakened action. Interestingly, as we will see, Finnigan, despite what she says in *this* essay, agrees.

3. Finnigan's Dilemma

Finnigan points out correctly that I fail adequately to distinguish two models of the acquisition of the kind of spontaneous responsiveness I argue a Chinese model can attribute to a buddha. She helpfully labels these two models as a Daoist *deconstructive* model and a Confucian *constructive* model. She writes:

...[T]he Classical Chinese offer us two different models of spontaneous responsiveness. On one account (the Confucian) this capacity is *acquired* as a result of cultivation and, on another (the Daoist), this capacity is *recovered* by removing the obscuration of culture. The question now arises: to which notion of spontaneous responsiveness does Garfield appeal in his claim that Buddhism is completed when it is taken to China?...¹

Garfield's position on this question is fundamentally ambiguous. In explicitly aligning the Buddhist Yogācāra ideas of foundation consciousness with Daoist thought, he seemingly invokes the Daoist *deconstructive* model of *recovering* spontaneity to account of a Buddha's capacity to act.²

...

However, in his appeal to metaphors of skill acquisition, Garfield can be seen to also invoke the Confucian *constructive* model of *acquiring* spontaneity to account for a Buddha's capacity to act. [12]

Finnigan is correct. I do appeal to both models in characterizing a Chinese account of a Buddha's enlightened consciousness. And there is at least a *prima facie* tension between them. Finnigan puts her finger on this tension:

¹ I register here a small discomfort with this exegesis of Garfield (2006). In that paper my concern is more narrow than "the completion of Buddhism." It is simply to understand how to construct a model of enlightened consciousness given Indian Buddhist nominalism, and the consequent difficulty of talking about a Buddha's mental states. But this exegetical point is not directly relevant to the philosophical question Finnigan raises here.

² Once again, I quarrel with the exegesis. I don't assert in (2006) that *alāya-vijñāna* is aligned with anything in Daoism. Nor is my principal concern *action*, though I agree that my account has the implications for a theory of action to which Finnigan draws attention. And again, I think that the exegetical question is beside the point. I just don't want the unwary reader to get the wrong idea about the contents or point of (2006).

...[W]hen the enlightened person acts spontaneously, do they do so in a way that is (at all) informed (however latently) by their internalized discourse or are their actions determined by their inherent nature? Garfield tells us that the internalized discourse must “(like a raft) be discarded” [21]; is “transcended” [23]; “we leave discourse behind” [23]. However, it is unclear whether this ‘leaving discourse behind’ is mere phenomenological abandonment (i.e. one responds spontaneously, without thinking about the internalized norms, but in a way that is structurally informed by these norms) or whether the abandonment is deeply structural with respect to the mind (i.e. one literally responds from the state of *alāya vijñāna*; free from conceptuality, representation and subject-object duality). Are the spontaneous responses of enlightened beings essentially the result of cultivation or do they arise from our inherent nature that, by methods involving the progressive purging of concepts and cultural norms, has finally been uncovered? [13]

According to Finnigan, then, there is a serious dilemma to be resolved and I can't have it both ways. Awakening, on her view, cannot consist *both* in the *accumulation* of cognitive and action-guiding skills that must be acquired by practice—however much they disappear from introspective consciousness—and in the *elimination* of cognitive and action guiding skills in favor of an *innate* set of skills that antedate practice. Now, I think I *can* have it both ways, and I, in accord with Finnigan and Tanaka (200x) will argue for this below.

For now, let us simply note that if Finnigan's dilemma were as destructive as she takes it to be, the Buddhist tradition as a whole would be in serious trouble. After all, Buddhist accounts of the path are replete both with admonitions to *cultivate* merit, compassion and non-dual wisdom *and* admonitions to *abandon* vice, attachment to self, and conceptual superimposition. Moreover, while we find self-grasping and other *kleśas* described as *innate*, inasmuch as they are present from birth in a single life, they are also described as *adventitious*, inasmuch as they arise from karma, are not part our fundamental nature, and can be extirpated. On the other hand, even though our buddha-nature or potential for awakening described as *innate*, this is presented, right from the Pali canon through to the late Mahāyāna, as part of our primordial nature, to be manifested spontaneously when obstructions are eliminated. The *kleśas* are to be abandoned through the cultivation of virtue, in order to enable spontaneous manifestation. This is common rhetoric of the path. Were Finnigan's dilemma as irresolvable as she suggests, the heart of the tradition would

have to be cut out. Fortunately, this is not the case. Before we see how Finnigan and I each resolve Finnigan's dilemma, let us see why the solution she proposes in the present article cannot work.

4. Finnigan's Solution

First, Finnigan argues that the deconstructive model cannot work. This is because on this model, the Buddha's "behavior would simply be a direct, innate response to the stimulation of particulars." [15] And of course such a response, being non-intentional, and incapable of being explained intentionally by its author, would fail the Davisonic condition for action.

Finnigan sums this up nicely:

...[T]he deconstructive model does not solve our problem. While a buddha's behavior may be designated ethical, a buddha cannot be claimed to intentionally act nor be designated as an ethical agent on this account. The deconstructive approach allows no room for a buddha to direct his behavior, let alone to provide reasons that explain the directedness of his behavior. [17]

The constructive model, Finnigan argues, fares better. She argues that on this model,

it is not that a buddha consciously represents his knowledge about the nature of reality and infers what action would be appropriate when he responds to situations. Rather, he can be said to have developed and refined the complex associative matrix that implicitly informs his responses. Phenomenologically, his responses are direct and do not involve any consciously represented thoughts (beliefs, intentions) but, nonetheless, they presuppose a complex cognitive structure. [21]

That is, like a good Confucian, a practitioner cultivates a sophisticated set of cognitive, perceptual and behavioral skills, and internalizes them to the point that one forgets that they are operative. This is indeed part of the account I advanced in (2006), of course. But, there is more to come. For Finnigan's concern is to understand the Buddha as a moral agent, and to understand his agency as appropriately Davisonic. To do so, we must still understand his action as intentional, and as explicable by him in intentional terms. Finnigan puts the point this way:

[A buddha's] responses are typically informed by previously learnt conceptual information... even if this information is not consciously occurrent at the time of action. Moreover, not only does this associative process enable a buddha to respond in a certain way, it is also the basis for reason-giving explanation. [23]

Now, Finnigan is aware that this Davidsonic account raises a problem for a Buddhist account of a buddha's action. She asks whether this model is compatible with Dharmakīrti's system. Finnigan answers "no" concluding that

This is because the 'objects' a buddha identifies, recognizes, discriminates between and articulates as content in reason-giving are generally characterized phenomena (i.e. they are conceptual types) and it is conceptualized cognition that is suspect in the Dharmakīrtian system. So we have a dilemma: either we accept the constructive model but revise (or reject) the Dharmakīrtian system or we jettison the idea that a buddha can act and, hence, be an ethical agent. [24]

Finnigan is correct to note that this horn of the dilemma would be anathema to Dharmakīrti. The reference to Dharmakīrti, though, is too narrow. The real question concerns whether this is compatible with *any* account according to which a buddha's knowledge and action is non-conceptual, non-inferential and spontaneous. It is not. And since *all* Buddhist accounts agree on these matters, this horn cannot be acceptable at all within the Buddhist tradition. This is the heart of the problem regarding the understanding of enlightened thought and action.³

Finnigan concludes by advising that we reject the view that a Buddha's thought and action are non-conceptual, rejecting the "Dharmakīrtian" nominalism of the tradition. She urges that this is a relatively minor revision, and claims to be in good (though unnamed) company in recommending this revision. Therefore, she concludes: First, the non-representational account of thought suggested by the Chinese tradition cannot provide an account of Buddhist agency. It is (1) incoherent, facing Finnigan's dilemma; and (2) incapable of grounding a Davidsonic theory of action. Second, a Davidsonic account is available to Buddhism that *can* provide such an account.

³ There is another way to put this point that may help to focus the difficulty for Finnigan's position: A buddha is not a *moral agent* in Buddhist theory, at least not in the sense that ordinary beings are. Action (*karma*), in Buddhist action theory, always produces *karma*, and a buddha does not produce *karma*. Hence, whatever a buddha does is not *action* in the ordinary sense. Moreover, Buddhist ethics is all about what an ordinary being needs to do to *become* a buddha. It is about cultivation of virtue, elimination of vice, practice of path, and so forth; in short, about self-transformation—about transforming oneself *into* a buddha. (See Garfield forthcoming.) But a buddha has already accomplished this. So, a buddha is neither an agent, nor a subject of ethical assessment, and so is not a moral agent. Finnigan is hence off on the wrong foot.

5. Finnigan's Wake

We will return to the charge of incoherence below. I happily conceded that the non-representational model I recommend cannot ground a Davidsonic theory of awakened action of the kind Finnigan proposes, but this is a virtue, not a vice. Finnigan's recommendation of what she regards as a "relatively minor" change to a Dharmakīrtian position is in fact unavailable to a Buddhist of any stripe, and would constitute a wholesale abandonment of Buddhist metaphysics, philosophy of mind and moral psychology. While Finnigan's account of awakened action might be an interesting *alternative* to Buddhism, it is not *Buddhist*. There are several reasons for this.

First of all, on Finnigan's model, a buddha must be ignorant of the contents of his own mind. She argues, as we have seen, that "phenomenologically, his responses are direct and do not involve any consciously represented thoughts (beliefs, intentions) but, nonetheless, they presuppose a complex cognitive structure." [21] On this account, his actions appear to him to be direct, involving no conceptual thought or inference, although in fact they do involve such thought. A buddha is hence essentially self-deceived (and knows less about his own actions than, for instance, Finnigan does). For a buddha to be systematically self-deceived about the nature of his own action is more than out of the spirit of an account of awakening; more than an abandonment of one strain of thought in the tradition—it violates any plausible, even deflated, construal of omniscience. On Finnigan's account, we lose buddhahood, and it is no longer clear what Buddhism is about.

There is a further irony: in an attempt to provide a Davidsonic account of awakened action, Finnigan has undermined a buddha's moral agency even by the lights of a Davidsonic theory. For that account of agency requires that we be able to give more or less accurate reason-based accounts of our own action. Massive self-deception renders that impossible. So, on this account, not only is a buddha not a buddha as Buddhism understands that status, but such a buddha is not a moral agent as a Davidsonian would understand *that* status.

Things get worse. A central idea behind the Davidsonic model Finnigan advances is that action, especially morally evaluable action, must be *intentional*. Intentionality in this sense

involves both *purposiveness*, and, as Finnigan has been at pains to argue, *contentfulness*. *Intention* is almost universally used in English translation of Buddhist Sanskrit and Pali technical vocabulary to translate *cetanā*, as in the oft-quoted statement by the Buddha, “It is intention (*cetanā*) that I call karma; intending, one acts by body, speech, and mind,” or in Nāgārjuna’s statement that “action is of two kinds: intention and the intentional.” And this is a very good translation. Buddhist action theorists agree with Finnigan that the action of non-awakened beings is universally intentional in just this sense, dependent upon *cetanā*. And, like Finnigan, Buddhist moral theorists tie moral responsibility to *cetanā*, since it is that which gives rise to karma.

There is a problem here for Finnigan, and a fatal one, a problem that gets to the heart of what is wrong with her account: *No Buddhist philosopher has ever accepted the thesis that a buddha has cetanā*, and indeed the absence of *cetanā* in a buddha is central to every Buddhist account of awakened consciousness. This is so for several related reasons. First, *cetanā* accumulates karma, and a Buddha does not do that. Second, *cetanā* is always conceptual, and a Buddha’s thought is non-conceptual. Third, *cetanā* involves desire, and a Buddha is without desire, since desire attaches one to cyclic existence. Fourth, *cetanā* intervenes between perception and action, and a Buddha’s responses are direct and immediate.

Now, one might argue on independent grounds that this is an incoherent or implausible theory of awakened action—that the Buddhist account of Buddhahood stands in need of wholesale revision—but that is neither what Finnigan takes herself to be doing nor she takes me to be doing. In (2006) I explore the resources the Buddhist tradition has for making sense of a buddha’s awakened action as it is described *internally*; Finnigan takes herself to be doing the same. That is precisely why it is important to her that she is proposing only “minor” revisions of doctrine, and, I suppose, the reason for the claim that she follows so many unnamed others in this direction. But this is no minor revision, and it is not attested either in the tradition or in recent scholarship. Instead, it is a heterodox position unavailable to any Buddhist, and for deep reasons.

All of this is to say in yet another way that Finnigan gets off on the wrong foot at the start by presuming the appropriateness of a Davidsonic model of action and responsibility in a context in which such a model is explicitly rejected. By presuming the appropriateness of this model of action across the board, Finnigan fails to see the radical distinction the Buddhist tradition draws between benighted and awakened action, and hence fails to see the difficult problem that is to be solved. Her solution is no solution at all within the tradition; instead, it is an abandonment of the tradition.

Finnigan finds herself forced to this abandonment because she is convinced that is the only tenable horn of a dilemma she poses at the end of her paper: “either we accept the constructive model but revise (or reject) the Dharmakīrtian system or we jettison the idea that a buddha can act and, hence, be an ethical agent.” [24] That is, however, a false dilemma. The “constructive model” Finnigan endorses is a jettisoning of Buddhism; the other horn—the one she rejects—is not the jettisoning of the idea that a Buddha can act, but a jettisoning of the idea that the Davidsonic theory of action is the only available theory. In (2006) I argued for just such an alternative. In a forthcoming paper with Tanaka, Finnigan joins me in endorsing that alternative. Let us turn to *her* defense of that position.

6. Finnigan's Other Account of Action

In (forthcoming) Finnigan and Tanaka ask what model of action is appropriate to the martial arts, and ask this question within a decidedly Japanese Buddhist framework. The problem they face is posed by the *prima facie* inconsistency of a Davidsonic theory of action with the Buddhist rhetoric and theory of action that permeates the Japanese martial arts discourse:

[A]n *action* is something more than a bodily movement that just happens. It seems that something goes on in our mind that directs our action. In order for us to say that we *acted*, we have to be able to say that we thought about it in this way or that... So, based on the beliefs (knowledge, memory, desires) we have at the time, we *deliberate* on the best course of action and that is what we do. [1]

How, then, should we understand the martial arts' message: 'Don't think! Just act!' in a way that doesn't mean just throwing away all thinking and theories? [2]

The problem is essentially this: If we think that our action is the result of *intentions* which we form by thinking about the best course of action, then, without a thinking-mind, we don't form intentions. But if there are no intentions, then there is no explanation of action. No explanation, no way to rationalize our action. No rationalization, no responsibility. ... But this seems crazy. [3]

So, the question is this: if to act is to think, how is it possible to act appropriately in the martial arts, if that is to act without thinking? Can this be action at all? The answer that Finnigan and Tanaka find proffered within the martial arts tradition is heavily inflected by Ch'an/Zen (and hence by the tradition on which I draw in (2006). They appeal to the idea of *mushin*, or no-mind:

In *dōjō*, 'Don't think! Just act!' is often summarized in terms of *mushin* (no-mind). ...

There is a ready-made answer to this question. The answer is: training. The difficult bit is to explain what training has got to do with *mushin*. [2]

We are trained to *understand kendo* so that, ultimately, we can explain *why* we act in the way we do, for instance, by reference to the ways of the traditional sword-masters. At the same time, we are trained to leave the thought about mental operations behind. [6]

There is, they hence suggest, another way to think of action. We act when our behavior satisfies an appropriate description, has an appropriate context in an evaluative matrix, and has been brought about through an appropriate training regime. Explanation and assessment of such action refers not to our intentions and belief, but rather to that training regime, the circumstances of action, and the appropriate evaluative matrix. Such an account of action and its explanation is non-Davidsonian, and makes no reference either to deliberation or to *cetanā*-intention. Our movement is an action in *kendo* because we have been trained to do this in this circumstance; because it is what the ancient sword-masters did, because it is elicited in this appropriate circumstance, *not* because we had an intention, a set of beliefs, and deliberated regarding the best way to actualize that intention, even unconsciously. This is spontaneous action. Finnigan and Tanaka make this point eloquently:

The mistake, though, is to think that the *only* way our knowledge, beliefs, desires have any bearing on our action is by selecting just one or two of them in deliberation and forming them into an intention which then causes us to *act*. It is a mistake to think that unless we *form* an intention at the time of the act, we are not acting intentionally. [6]

So there is reason why we can't say that actions from *mushin*—that don't involve deliberation or intention formation at the time of action—are not intentional. There is no reason to think that a master who acts from *mushin* does not act intentionally. [6]

You don't have to be a Buddha—even a black belt *kendo* practitioner can act spontaneously. But a buddha acts spontaneously even in street clothes.

7. Finnigan's Awakening

Finnigan is not unaware that hers and Tanaka's reflections on the nature of action in the martial arts have more general significance for the theory of action. Action can be understood quite generally as the outcome of hard training, and its explanation may advert simply to that training and to the consequence responsiveness one develops. She and Tanaka write:

Our actions express how accomplished we are, where this is the outcome of much hard training. ... Importantly, one's accomplishment as a *kendōka* is not explained in terms of what generated the action. It *expressed* in one's ability to respond in appropriate ways. [7]

And so, I presume, she would agree, a moral agent's actions can also be assessed in normative terms appropriate to the matrix of training, and to the circumstances of elicitation, and not in terms of her *intentions, representations, deliberations, or choices*. Moral psychology can be non-Davidsonic just as can be action theory. For a buddha who has abandoned conceptuality and is without *cetanā*, just as for the *kendōka*, the account of awakened action can only be non-Davidsonic. And fortunately, Finnigan and Tanaka have shown, using an argument strikingly reminiscent of that in Garfield (2006) that that makes good sense, and even that it is an East Asian Buddhist perspective that provides the key to understanding how and why it does so.

8. Cultivating Nature

It is now time to return to Finnigan's dilemma. She argues that I can't have it both ways: that the model of the cultivation of a Buddha's spontaneous responsiveness cannot both be constructive and deconstructive. As I noted above, there is *prima facie* reason to believe that it can be: both metaphors are common in Buddhist literature, and indeed are often joined in a discourse of what is to be abandoned and what is to be taken up. We are to cultivate virtue, and to abandon the afflictions of confusion, attachment and aversion and their consequences, the superimposition of inherent existence, conceptual fabrication, etc.

Is the cultivation necessarily Confucian? I think not. Those traits we are enjoined to cultivate are often spoken of, even in India, as *antidotes*; and primal confusion, *avidya*, is characterized as positive—as the active projection of the false, not simply as the failure to apprehend the truth. The cultivation of virtues and of correct view is, in the metaphor of Candrakīrti, the application of an ointment that *removes* the cataracts of ignorance; the cultivation of patience is, for Śāntideva, the elimination of an obstacle to compassion.

The cultivation Buddhism recommends is seen, even in an Indian context, as the development not of essentially positive qualities, but as the development of ways to *eliminate* vice, to remove obstacles to the manifestation of our potential for perfection. It is only when Buddhism moves to China, I argued in (2006) that this becomes explicitly thematized in terms of a Buddha-nature, and in terms of a return to spontaneity. The metaphors that enable that thematization are indeed borrowed both from Taoist and Confucian sources, and both sources infiltrate Chinese Buddhism in complex ways. (See Gregory 2002 for details.) But the metaphors are not inconsistent with one another, and the model is not incoherent. We cultivate our own nature; we do so by developing the qualities that eliminate the obstacles to its spontaneous manifestation; that manifestation is present in awakening; that awakening enables spontaneous engagement; that engagement is awakened action; that action, like that of the *kendōka* is an *expression* of our awakened nature. I thank Finnigan both for pointing out the unclarity in the exposition of (2006) and for hers and Tanaka's defense of its central thesis.

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